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Salvagers may pump water from vessel

By Chuck Frederick

News Tribune staff writer

After 2 days of failed attempts, salvagers will regroup this morning and try to devise a new plan to save a dredge barge that sank in the Duluth harbor.

Plan B likely will include a submersible pump that would suck water out of the barge while air continues to be pumped in, Lt. Cmdr. Andrew Palmiotto of the U.S. Coast Guard station in Duluth said. Palmiotto discussed the new approach Thursday as workers quit after trying since Tuesday to refloat the vessel.

“It doesn't look like it's working,” Palmiotto said. “We need to come up with a new plan -- the two things working in tandem. Hopefully, that'll do it.”

Salvagers had hoped to buoy the barge this week by pumping air into its ballast tanks. But there were just too many holes in the barge and too much air escaped, Palmiotto said.

Creating new fittings for the submersible pump will take three to four days, meaning salvagers won't be able to resume their attempts until next week. The plan's success requires that the weather stays warm and the harbor doesn't freeze over.

The dredge barge has been at the bottom of the Duluth Harbor Basin since Nov. 3. A day earlier it unexpectedly began to take on water while dredging shipping lanes under a contract with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

What caused the mishap is unclear. It's been decades since a large vessel went down in the harbor.

Two weeks ago, divers connected steel cables to the 60-ton excavator



Tinky



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backhoe from the bed of the barge. It was lifted to the surface and towed to shore for repairs.

Once brought to the surface, the barge, too, would be towed to shore for repairs, likely at Fraser Shipyards in Superior.

The owner of the barge, Bob Billington of Billington Contracting, of Duluth, said Thursday he was frustrated by the lack of progress on the barge, but remained optimistic.

“I sure as heck would have hoped it would be out of there by now,” Billington said. “But it’s an insurance claim. It’s not money directly out of my pocket. So if it takes time, it takes time.”

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